

FROM HEADLINES TO HOMES: MEDIA COVERAGE AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF EUROPE'S REFUGEE CRISIS

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Europe's "refugee crisis"—as it has come to be labeled—has gained more and more media coverage over the past year. But, in reality, the precipitating events—the things that sent millions of Syrians fleeing for their lives—began long before European media outlets cared to spare inches in newspapers and minutes in newsreels. This paper seeks to analyze media coverage of the refugee crisis and to highlight the impact that language and framing have on public perception of the crisis.

The public has been willing—in seemingly equal measure—to be both incensed by foreigners seeking aid and to be moved by heart wrenching personal stories and devastating images of many refugees. Media consumers sit like children on a seesaw, with no firm footing in statistics or objective facts, ready to be tossed into the throes of empathetic anguish or nationalistic isolationism—whichever the coverage of the day dictates.

In an environment saturated by news sources, media outlets compete to remain relevant. But, instead of driving outlets to develop original or unique content, this struggle drives outlets to cover many of the same issues in the same

ways. No outlet wants to miss the “breaking news” its competitor has given front-page status.

The conflict in Syria began over five years ago. According to UN statistics, by June 2013, 90,000 people had been killed in the conflict. A UN inquiry into Syria commissioned in 2011 found that perpetrators were guilty of war crimes including murder, torture, and rape. Since then, battling forces have employed chemical warfare, among other gruesome tactics, to try to gain the upper hand. But before desperate peoples began knocking on British doors, coverage of the conflict was at best sporadic and at worst intentionally blind.

An estimated 4.5 million people have fled the country in the past five years. Of those, only about one in 10 has sought asylum in Europe.¹ The rest have fled to countries bordering Syria, countries that have been largely unable to meet the demand for resources and aid.

UK awareness of, sympathy for, and antipathy toward asylum seekers has paralleled major media coverage of events like the drowning of three-year-old Syrian boy [Aylan Kurdi](#) and the New Year’s Eve [sexual assaults in Cologne](#).

Both of these events—and the subsequent public response—emphasize the strong influence that media has on public perception, regardless of actual statistical data or substantive fact. The photo of a small child face down on a beach humanized the crisis in a way that statistics simply could not. The truth is that Aylan Kurdi’s death did not mark an uptick in children making the

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26116868>

treacherous journey from Turkey to Greece. However, the media's choice to publish the graphic image mobilized an entire community of people who had successfully distanced themselves from the traumatic reality of many refugees' plight.

The Sun offers a particularly effective case study in shifting opinion. In April 2015, The Sun published an opinion piece in which columnist Katie Hopkins [equated refugees to cockroaches](#) that would invade and breed in the UK. Her piece, which was criticized for being equivalent to racially charged hate speech, was titled "Rescue boats? I'd use gunships to stop migrants." Although her piece was criticized as being inflammatory², the anti-refugee sentiments it conveyed were not particularly unusual in the media and general population³. However less than six months later, when photos of the young Syrian boy dead on the beaches of Turkey surfaced, the Sun issued a [statement](#) urging "David Cameron to help those in a life-and-death struggle not of their own making". This shift was mirrored in a number other publications, like The Mirror and the Daily Mail.

² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/katie-hopkins-urged-to-apologise-for-dehumanising-column-comparing-refugees-to-cockroaches-after-10484400.html>

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3301963/Katie-Hopkins-not-face-charges-allegations-incited-racial-hatred-article-comparing-migrants-cockroaches.html>

Aylan Kurdi's death marked a distinct shift in international public opinion regarding the refugee crisis and even spurred policy change with the UK agreeing to take in more Syrian refugees shortly after the photo was released.⁴

Many media outlets have employed loaded language throughout coverage to connote certain things about the crisis and its victims. In seeking to dismiss refugees, many media outlets have continually referred to them as 'migrants' and 'foreigners.' These terms are loaded with problematic connotations. The term 'migrant' implies a more voluntary relocation. In many contexts, an implied 'economic' is attached to the term; thus suggesting that such migrants are simply moving to pursue economic opportunity, rather than as a result of actual duress in their home countries. The choice to use 'migrant' over 'refugee' has serious humanitarian implications. Refusing to linguistically recognize the plight of the refugees in effect denies them their rights under the Refugee Convention.

Newspapers in the UK are predominantly centre-right and have thus provided fairly critical coverage of the refugee crisis.⁵ Despite the fact that incoming refugees are now predominantly women and children⁶, the conservative media have used events like the Cologne attacks to suggest that the refugees are all young, violent males.

⁴ <http://time.com/4022765/aylan-kurdi-photo/>

⁵ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/02/07/british-press-most-right-wing-europe/>

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/feb/02/more-women-and-children-than-men-seeking-european-asylum-says-unicef>

Historically, newspapers have played a large role in British society and politics. But, as crises develop, news consumers must remember that what they see on front pages is not often representative of the real plight of refugees desperately seeking safety in the UK.

The struggle between biased media coverage and the reality of a humanitarian crisis is not an entirely new one for the UK. In 1938, The Daily Mail published an article warning of "German Jews Pouring Into This Country".⁷ The reality is that versions of that same headline—with 'migrant' in the place of 'German Jew'—are being used by media outlets today. Just as it is now, the xenophobia was based in fear—fear that German Jews would be sympathetic to the country from which they had fled. This fear led to the internment of many who had been identified as victims of the Nazi regime.

Today, these same fears—for instance fears that Muslim refugees will be sympathetic to the mission of jihadis—continue to influence the way the press is reporting the refugee crisis. In 1940, it was media coverage of tragedy that spurred change in Britain's internment policy. Over 700 people died aboard a ship full of internees that was torpedoed as it was headed to Canada. In an instant—perhaps in a single headline—there was public outcry, and that same year the British government reversed its policy of interning non-threatening nationals.⁸ Headlines have effects; the media has the power to be an agent of

⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/07/31/daily-mail-1938-jews_n_7909954.html

⁸ <http://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/blog/collar-lot-britains-policy-internment-second-world-war/>

positive social change. However, news consumers also have the responsibility to think critically about the information they are given and to seek out facts, even if they are not reported on the front-pages of every newspaper they see.

Below are some resources to help you learn more about the facts of the crisis:

Statistics and infographics about Syrian civil war:

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/14/world/middleeast/syria-war-deaths.html>

United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IIICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx>

UN Statistics on Syrian Refugees:

<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>